The American Community Survey: Should I Use the One-Year or Three-Year Estimates?

New multiyear estimates released in 2008 for the American Community Survey now provide two options to look at data for geographic areas with populations of 65,000 or more. They are –

One-year estimates – based on data collected in calendar year 2007 and,
Three-year estimates – based on data collected from January 2005 through December 2007.

Data users can decide when and under what circumstances they want to use the data sets. For smaller geographic areas, with populations between 20,000 and 64,999, only three-year estimates are available. When making comparisons between different areas, it is best to compare three-year data to three-year data, or one-year data to one-year data.

Some top-line factors to consider include the following:

ACS estimates describe the average characteristics over the entire period of data collection. For example, the 2007 ACS estimates represent the average characteristics over the 12 months from January 2007 through December 2007. The 2005-2007 ACS three-year estimates represent the average characteristics over the 36 months from January 2005 through December 2007.

The trade-off between currency and precision. The three-year estimates are based on a larger sample and are therefore more reliable but they use less current data. They include about three times as many sample interviews as one-year estimates, but a third of those data are three years old and a third are two years old. When deciding between one- and three-year estimates, users must balance the need for precision against how rapidly the estimate is changing over the three-year period.

The following table provides some general guidance on which estimates to use:

	One-Year Estimates	Three-Year Estimates
Areas with populations between 20,000 and 64,999	Not available.	Use.
Areas with populations of 65,000 or more	Preferable when the *currency* of the data is more important than *precision.* Preferable when looking at data for larger population groups in larger areas with relatively small margins of error associated with the one-year estimates. Preferable when looking at data with relatively small margins of errors.	Preferable when the *precision* of the data is more important than its *currency.* Preferable when looking at data for smaller population groups in larger areas. Preferable when looking at one-year estimates with relatively large margins of error.

For more information, visit the Using Multiyear Estimates Web page at <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/UseData/myeoverview.html>.